

## ERNEST WORK ON ETHIOPIAN EDUCATION

By R.A. Caulk

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1. English trans. in Margery Perham, *The Government of Ethiopia* (London, 1969), p. 424. Christopher Clapham, *Haile-Selassie's Government* (London, 1969), pp. 34-36.
2. William R. Scott, "Malaku E. Bayen: Ethiopian Emissary to Black America, 1936-1941," *Ethiopia Observer*, XV, 2 (1972), p. 133.
3. F. Ernest Work, "A Plan for Ethiopia's Educational System," *Journal of Negro Education*, III, 1 (Jan. 1934), pp. 66-68, reproduced as Appendix I in Maaza Bekele, "A Study of Modern Education in Ethiopia with emphasis on its Development and its Future," unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Columbia Univ. (1966), pp. 281-84.

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he was determined to learn about the place in which the new educational system was to work before erecting any paper schemes. "I set myself to study the people and the conditions surrounding them that I might be able to make sound recommendations," he wrote.<sup>4</sup>

Work became convinced that the rivalries of the European coastal powers led them to give conflicting advice which was inspired more by the desire to further the interests of their adjoining colonies than to help solve the variety of problems which confronted the Ethiopians. He rejected the importation of any complete system European or American, and started from the principal that Ethiopians must have an Ethiopian system or at least one tailored for them whatever the new sources of inspiration.

He had travelled elsewhere in Africa and was critical of the colonial concern for fixing the metropolitan culture upon the subject African: "I am anxious that Ethiopia at least be permitted to develop its culture and, in fact, be aided in so doing."<sup>5</sup> Instruction, he urged, should not even be in a European language, alien to all, but in Amharic which had the advantage of being already a written, Ethiopian language. He was confident that it could be modernized to deal with any subject of instruction by creating an academy to draw on Geez for creating a richer and integral vocabulary. He thought it worse than wasteful that students should labour over a totally foreign language which gave them access only to a literature about distant lands and peoples. He scoffed at the exercise by which Ethiopians learned to read about Napoleon, Garibaldi or Gladstone depending on whether the pupil had laboured with French, Italian or English, "but almost nothing about Ethiopia and Menelik."<sup>6</sup> This alien baggage he wished to throw out: "Ethiopian boys and girls should be educated in their own language, learn about their own country and men and interesting things, as well as the world in general."<sup>7</sup>

In listing the priorities which had determined his recommendations, Work placed first the need to use a local language and, therefore, to prepare textbooks in that language and about Ethiopia. Next he set the goal of freeing Ethiopian education from reliance on foreign teachers. To train a corps of Ethiopian teachers, he saw no alternative to the founding of a "University of Ethiopia" beginning with a teachers' training school. Other departments would be added later, he explained. Funds for this institution should be sought from persons or groups in the USA, he thought, to avoid the politics of "European grabbing rivalry for African lands."<sup>8</sup> This

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4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

showed a nationalist bias which ignored the warm interest a few Americans had shown in competing with British companies for concessions.<sup>9</sup> However his was a judgment Ethiopians of that generation shared.<sup>10</sup> In any case, Work was not arguing for any particularly American methods of teacher training, only for what he thought might be 'cleaner' money to finance the school. Finally he wished to see comprehensive and long-term planning to integrate the sporadic and piecemeal efforts of the missions and other individual patrons of schools.

Sometime before June 1931, Work submitted a report to the Director General of Public Education, *Belatēngēta* Sahlä Tsädalu, who had been educated in France in the 1920s and then appointed to the new ministry created in 1930.<sup>11</sup> Work criticised in this report<sup>12</sup> the lack of attention in existing schools to planned curricula and to the supervision of teachers. "Petty friction and quarrels among teachers" he noted, "is now a very great evil" and urged that the Director General be empowered to settle questions authoritatively. He also warned that the foreign adviser should give advice only and not encroach on the prerogatives of the Director General. He saw "one of the greatest needs" to be the training of Ethiopian teachers to take over the existing schools and to staff new ones.

He objected to foreigners on the grounds of expense and because he thought a new kind of education would gain acceptance more readily if offered by Ethiopians themselves. He favoured the founding of a university as a means of training this corps of teachers and, also, because Ethiopians would not then have to go abroad in large numbers for long periods of time. He was especially critical of the literature he found available to students: "There is at present a complete lack of textbooks suited in any way for Ethiopia." Any improvement in education, indeed any education

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9. Southard to State, Addis Ababa, 11 Dec. 1928; USA, Records of the Department of State Relating to the Internal Affairs of Ethiopia, National Archives (Washington), 884.01/8.
  10. Great Britain, "Ethiopia: Annual Report, 1929," Addis Ababa, 28 July 1930, Records of the Foreign Office at the Public Record Office (London; hereafter: FO), FO 371/14598: 9186, para 45; "Ethiopia: Annual Report, 1931," Addis Ababa, 20 January 1932, para. 106, FO 371/16101: 9197. Brice Harris, *The United States and the Italo-Ethiopian Crisis* (Stanford, 1964), pp. 30-31.
  11. Adrien Zervos, *L'Empire d'Ethiopie: l'Ethiopie telle qu'elle était en septembre 1935* (Alexandria, 1936), p. 223.
  12. "Report to His Majesty Haile Sellassie I, the Emperor of Ethiopia, and to His Excellency Sahlä Sedalou, Director General of Public Instruction," unsigned, undated carbon copy of a typescript in which future dates of June, July and 1 October 1931 appear. I am indebted to Dr. F. Watts, History Dept., Wooster College, Wooster, Ohio, and to his African history students for this and the other two unpublished documents cited in this paper; they were obtained from the widow of F.E. Work in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and photocopies are deposited in the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, MS collection.

which would not alienate the student from his environment, he warned, would require a complete set of especially prepared textbooks in English and French as well as Amharic (so that they might be used in all schools by all teachers): "written from the Ethiopian point of view with as much good material about Ethiopia as can be found." Standard Ethiopian texts were not simply intended to convey knowledge, but:

"to assure our students getting to know the same things about their own country and increase unity and patriotism among our people. As it is, our boys are being educated away from Ethiopian things and toward Europe. It is well enough to know about Europe, but we must not neglect Ethiopia."

This was to be a favorite theme and was closely linked to the question of which system Ethiopia's schools should be modelled upon. "No school system," he answered flatly, "in use in a foreign and far distant country, however effective it is there, should be adopted as a whole in another country where conditions are greatly different, but a good schools system should be made to suit the local conditions." He concluded his general remarks in this report by the further warning that unless the government could carry out its plans for building good roads rapidly, no effective school system could ever be extended beyond the capital.

In his report, Work made a series of specific, practical suggestions for immediate action: to Ethiopianize wherever possible existing positions of school director, to require in new contracts that teachers agree to abide by the decisions of their superiors in the Ministry, to consult teachers through regular meetings, to introduce a standard curriculum, even if it proved to be temporary, the very next academic year. He also recommended that standard textbooks be written "from the Ethiopian point of view" and that a teachers' training school be established which might "gradually grow into a University but its first great work should be to train teachers." He concluded by asking for a renewal of his own contract undertaking to assist the Director General in introducing a standard curriculum and, with the help of an assistant, to prepare textbooks "containing Ethiopian material" for use during a trial period in English classes. He further offered to serve the Ethiopian government by going to America to secure money for the teachers' training school or university and to recruit Americans to teach in it.

Rather oddly, he also proposed that while employed by the government, he give lectures in the USA and write newspaper articles to present "the real Ethiopia and its hopes and plans in order that American people may become more acquainted with Ethiopia and become greatly interested in this country." The curriculum, he promised, would be drafted before his current contract expired in any event.

A much longer report including a proposed curriculum for elementary schools was duly prepared and presented.<sup>13</sup> Much space was dedicated to expounding his priorities for reform at greater length. "It is very much more important," he repeated, "to the Ethiopian citizen that he should know the history of his own country that he may understand and deal intelligently with his present problems, than that he should know all about Alexander or Napoleon." In addition, new themes appear:

"The time is at hand when Ethiopia must TRAIN HER OWN PEOPLE to take part in the duties and responsibilities of GOVERNMENT, THE BUSINESSES, AND THE PROFESSIONS. It is neither possible nor desirable that an independent country should long continue to have the major part of this work done by foreigners. Every country, to do well, must have a great, intelligent middle class of business and professional workers."

In the introduction to his long report, Work drew attention to the kinds of education: training future leaders and a popular, mass education. He often reverted to his scheme for a teachers' training school which he now equated with founding a four-year university. He also projected the establishment of six-year secondary schools in each province although these were to be vocational as well as "feeders" for an eventual university. Despite this top-heavy plan, Work was emphatic, when he got to the elementary schools, that they were "the most important of all" because: "They are for the education of the masses and will be the only school available for the great majority of the people." He qualified such institutions as "village or community schools" urging that inspired teachers, not fine buildings, be the precondition for opening many of them and that these local teachers not then be neglected by officials in the Ministry in Addis Ababa.

"There is no more useful individual in any country," Work affirmed, "than the well prepared, conscientious local teacher." Such men in the village schools, he anticipated, would combine skills in gardening and handicrafts with exceptional character and some academic training: "Schools should exist for the development of the whole man." While he placed great weight on the teacher's moral duties in the community, he also made a long list of practical skills which the local teacher through the village schools was to diffuse. The functioning of the human body, the science of plant and animal life, hygiene and sanitation, household arts and child care were to be at the centre of the curriculum. "It seems to me that one of the most unfortunate results of the education thus far

13. "A Suggested Plan for Ethiopia's School System Prepared for His Majesty Haile Sellassie I by F. Ernest Work," 57 pp., signed carbon copy of a typescript with later (?) annotation, "1931". IES, MS collection.

carried on in Ethiopia," he added, "is that it has increased the depreciation of labor — especially for labor with the hands — in the opinion of students, rather than having shown them the dignity and importance of laboring with our hands as well as with our minds." Farming and "other kinds of hand labor should receive large consideration in our school plan" and this, he underlined, from the elementary grades. Along with academic and business subjects, he rounded out his proposal of the subjects to be taught in the whole system by insisting that to listen to lectures or read about abstract matters should not monopolize teaching at any stage. "The concrete and definite character of industrial and scientific education is . . . [a] necessary . . . supplement," he thought, even for those who were not going to practice a trade.

The aims of education which Work set out in his long report of 1931 were clearly not calculated to extend mere book learning. Reading and writing of Amharic were considered fundamentals to be soundly taught and improved throughout life. Similarly, the arithmetic needed for the "tasks of everyday life" was to be learned by all. But other subjects, such as geography and health were to be related to the child's own experience: "One of the good results of an education should be to aid us in keeping well." Elsewhere, he justified the study of nature and of agriculture in the first grades on the grounds that a child "must learn to understand life as he comes in contact with it from day to day." And he laid down the maxim for the teacher of botany and biology that it was not the mastery of technical terms but an ability to observe nature accurately which was needed by most people. The development of character, an improved standard of health, the highest possible development of agriculture, the development of industrial trades and skills, the improvement of the home and the fostering of national unity "through a COMMON EDUCATION in a COMMON LANGUAGE" (his emphasis), these were the objectives Work stressed.

The final structure which he outlined in diagram looked very much like the educational system of Ohio or any other American state or European country. The elementary schools were to lead to a certificate and opened the possibility, for some at least, to aspire to higher schools for trades, the civil service and entry into a university department. In his diagram, Work repeated his motto: "the great mass to go into work upon completing this course" when drawing a square to represent the six-year elementary schools. But despite the injunctions of his curriculum for concentrating on the village teacher and practical instruction and learning, he had opened the way for all lower schools to be the reservoirs for higher ones up to the "A.B., M.D., L.L.B., B. of Agr. etc." which he marked at the top of his outline. Nor was there any way for him to provide against the orientation of his system being turned in favour of the more expensive institutions which were to provide a small group of leaders.

The main flaw in Work's draft was his inability to account for financing. Indeed he dealt with this problem in less than a page excusing himself because: "I have not been able, as yet, to learn the probable amount of money available for school purposes nor the sources from which it now comes." He recommended careful budgeting and the endowing of all schools with land, but admitted that the government would have to settle on a system of general taxation before schools or any other new services could be adequately provided for. Another dilemma was created by the lack of teachers. To provide them, he always came back to recommending that the few resources of money and manpower be concentrated at the top of his structure. Hence he concluded his long report with the recommendation that a secondary school and the teachers' training school be opened first. What resources would then have been left for his elementary schools and the village teachers he did not try to guess. The university seemed indispensable for other reasons:

"Any country needs a great middle class of merchants and professional men. At present business is conducted by foreigners and it would be quite unfortunate to have a country's great middle class always composed of foreigners."

Thus his teacher's training school was soon to have a business department added to it and so for other subjects.

Rather despairingly, Work concluded by insisting that the new constitution could never work unless educated leaders had an educated people to lead; viz., universal education plus a university. At least 75-80% of the people, he thought, would have access only to the elementary schools if anything. In fact, it was overly optimistic of him to imagine that the balance, up to 25%, could be provided with higher education. For all his practical concerns in the classroom, Work does not seem to have taken seriously enough the obstacle to any ambitious reforms being made in the early 1930s until a thorough reordering of the state's finances could be effected. And it was precisely in fiscal reform that the progressives and the new emperor were unsuccessful. Given the limitations of the money economy and of the capital's effective power over the provinces in those years a thorough reform of taxation and expenditure was impossible. Educational reform on the scale Work wrote of was beyond the material resources of the Ethiopian state. The cost of running one of the high schools already existing in the capital on Work's arrival seems to have been as high as one third or a quarter of the revenues paid in by even a large province.<sup>14</sup>

14. Richard Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia 1800-1935* (Addis Ababa, 1968), pp. 526, 540; cf., p. 29. Work in an interview ignored this insisting: "The trouble . . . is that there are no teachers." Quoted in W.J. Makin, *War over Ethiopia* (London, 1935), p. 104.

The interdependence of revenues and reform was well understood in the early '30s. Among the foreign advisers hired after 1930 was an American financial expert to advise on monetary and other reforms. Those departments of the central government, such as the customs, which dealt with taxes were given special attention in attempts at administrative reform. Much reliance was placed on gradually infiltrating the foreign educated into such key jobs in order to assure greater efficiency and honesty in the parts of the bureaucracy which handled cash. Individuals were optimistic that this slow process would work. "We young Abyssinians," one junior official told a journalist on the eve of the Italo-Ethiopian war, "are the bridge... thrown across to European culture... to complete the civilization of our country."<sup>15</sup> Others spoke of themselves as crusaders: "the men who take it upon themselves to make a European country out of this backward African Empire will be the first martyrs in the revolution for the conservatives rule the country and conservative here means backward and pitiless. We the younger generation are the friends of progress and humanity while they are its enemies!"<sup>16</sup>

Although the progressives spoke of their hopes enthusiastically and worked hard, they left all initiative to the palace as others did. Personal government left no room for the delegation of authority or responsibility. At times the progressives were paralysed by their deference to the emperor's demand that he supervise every detail: "Until he empowers us, we can undertake nothing."<sup>17</sup> Admiring foreign visitors in the years before the 1935-6 war describe an indefatigable prince intent on reform, if only to enhance his own power, but with little originality and hindered by a smothering habit of insisting that he must sanction each and every action of subordinates. It is this manner of government which justifies one commentator's calling the years 1930-35, "A Radical Paternalism."<sup>18</sup>

By 1934, the central government was still in considerable straits for money and there had been little progress in improving the administration: "Corruption, stupidity and obstruction continue to pervade all branches."<sup>19</sup> As there was little cash officials could not be properly salaried and the unsalaried or poorly salaried diverted monies from the treasury to their own pockets. This vicious circle inhibited the implementation of educational and other reforms which waited on the supply of cash. It was compounded by the priority given for extravagance in building and furnishing

15. L. Farago, *Abyssinia on the Eve* (London, 1936), p. 38.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 38. Cf., pp. 58-59 and J.E. Baum, *Savage Abyssinia* (London, 1928), p. 31.

18. Subchapter heading to Chapter III, Richard Greenfield, *Ethiopia: a new political history* (London, 1967), p. 165 ff.

19. "Ethiopia: Annual Report, 1934," Addis Ababa, 25 January 1935, FO 371/19189:9207, para. 48.

a new palace and for the costly, but necessary, airplanes and other new weapons needed to prepare for defence and to gain firm control over the provinces and their revenues. A serious blow to the meager financial resources available to carry out reforms was the collapse of coffee and other prices of exports in the world-wide depression from 1929. This greatly reduced the value of Ethiopian exports. Customs and other revenues dependent on them declined.<sup>20</sup>

Despite Work's grandiose plans, there was very little improvement in the educational opportunities of Ethiopians in the years before the war. The faith in the value of new learning imported from abroad survived, but little was done to end what one post-war enthusiast for modern education called "the night of ignorance."<sup>21</sup> Foreign advisers with little experience of local conditions, it was observed, ran the risk of not giving the best advice or might prove ineffective because their advice was not taken.<sup>22</sup> Some of Work's advice certainly had been sound; little seems to have been listened to.<sup>23</sup>

The one proposal which was taken up from Work's reports was that a national university should be founded under American auspices. In late July 1932, he received written assurances that he might act on the government's behalf in America in seeking support for this project. This letter<sup>24</sup> suggests that in addition to Work's reasons for wanting such an expensive institution (to supply teachers and create an Ethiopian bourgeoisie), the Ethiopian government welcomed the suggestion because of the prestige involved and because, after an initial gift of cash and land, the costs would be borne by American sponsors. The British legation pointed to a more positive reason.

20. *Ibid.*, paras. 8,11,12. "Ethiopia: Annual Report, 1932," Addis Ababa, 12 Jan. 1933, para. 18, 38, FO 371/16996:9197. Farago, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-78, 89. Pankhurst, *Economic History*, pp. 29, 406.
21. Kebede Mikael, *Ethiopia and Western Civilisation: Essay* (Addis Ababa, 1949), p. 105.
22. "Ethiopia: Annual Report, 1931," *loc. cit.*, para. 35.
23. Cf., Olle Eriksson, "Education in Abyssinia," *Africa*, V (1932), pp. 339, 342-43, on the need for books in the vernacular before anything else could be done, on the poverty of general knowledge which ruled out higher schools and the need for village schools under local teachers for primary literacy, and on the need to cultivate among students an appreciation for work. Also the earlier reform proposed by *Nägad-ras* Bäckadägn Gäbrä Heywät in L. Fusella (trans.), "Menelik e l'Etiopia in un testo amarico del Baykadan," *Annali dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli*, NS, IV (1952), pp. 140-41. R. Pankhurst, "Education, Language and History: An Historical Background to Post-War Ethiopia," *Ethiopian Journal of Education*, VII, 1 (June 1974), p. 91, speaks of an "unprecedented advance" in education in 1930-35 and that this was "beginning to effect a significant transformation of society." Only 4,000 children, however, were attending school in the last year before the war he admits, pp. 91, 93-94.
24. Heruy to Work, Addis Ababa, 19 Hamlé 1924/26 July 1932, original and trans- from the Work papers; photocopies in IES, MS collection. See appendix

“On the whole, it would probably be better for the Ethiopians if they could obtain advanced education in their own country. As things are at present, those who go and study abroad frequently return discontented with their own country and find themselves unable to obtain the employment to which they consider that they are entitled by their superior knowledge.”<sup>25</sup>

Proof that what Work recommended was in part wise is found in a memorandum of educational reform drafted after the war in August 1944 by a British adviser, who had been serving since 1942, and the Ministry. The possibility of an eventual university was again mentioned. The section on mass education set the by now familiar, practical aims of literacy, better hygiene, the encouraging of social life and training in crafts. These are reminiscent of the education for everyday life of Work's elementary grades in the village schools. Priority was again placed on building up a large literature in an Ethiopian vernacular, on the need for planning, and on the replacing of foreign staff with Ethiopians. Work's words may have been remembered. Good sense alone may have revived his aims. Again it was admitted that they were not related to any plans for fiscal reform.<sup>26</sup> And when money did become available the practical aims slipped from sight.

Ernest Work is best remembered among Ethiopianists today as the author of a book which he wrote on his return to Ohio to put Ethiopia's case against Italian aggression before the American public. In the preface dated New Concord, 1935, he returned to one of his favorite themes. Ethiopians, he appealed, must have an opportunity for “their own peculiar culture . . . [to] be advanced to its highest possible state.”<sup>27</sup> Though polemical, the book is evidence of his sincerity in the cause of fitting imported culture and technology to local needs. Unfortunately it does not throw light on whether he had been viewed as a crank at the end of his stay in Ethiopia or an idealist or why otherwise his recommendations for all their good sense had so little influence on thinking about the kind of education the Ministry should attempt when it would have funds. A top-heavy structure was created after the war. This had not needed Work's outline. It was an obvious borrowing, without the base, from European and American systems of formal education. It would be interesting to know from those who worked with him or participated in decisions in the Ministry of Education later, why his warnings against mere book learning went un-

25. “Ethiopia: Annual Report, 1932,” *loc. cit.*, para. 40; also, “Ethiopia: Annual Report, 1931,” *loc. cit.*, para. 35.

26. Perham, *op. cit.*, pp. 252-53.

27. F. Ernest Work, *Ethiopia, A Pawn in European Diplomacy* (New Concord, n.d.) preface dated: Ohio, August 1935. He makes the dubious claim, note 4, p. 6, that he had a hand in drafting the constitution of 1931.



## Appendix

To

Mr. F. Ernest Work

Adviser to the Ministry of Education

of the Empire of Ethiopia

Peace Be Unto You.

His Majesty has requested that I should inform you, if the People of the United States, under your guidance, would please to help in opening a University, even as they have done in many other foreign lands, it would make us happy to name the University, the University of Haile Selassie I. An institution of this type would prepare our people to serve our country and the world in the best way. If the good people of the United States would wish to help in establishing such an institution, His Imperial Majesty has made the following provisions:-

- I. The name of the institution shall be called the University of Haile Selassie I. The purpose of this university shall be to prepare the youth of this land for the service of our country and the world.
- II. The affairs of the University shall be managed by American citizens, but if His Majesty wishes to change the administration when he feels prepared, he shall pay back the money that was contributed by the American people and take over the institution to have it managed by his own directors.
- III. His Majesty will give sufficient land on which the buildings of the University may be placed. This land will be sufficient for private agricultural purposes of the University as well as for buildings.
- IV. His Majesty will furnish certain materials necessary for the buildings of the University. In the process of building, His Majesty will furnish the things that are available in Ethiopia, such as wood materials, stores, cement, and so forth.
- V. Toward helping the University, His Majesty will furnish One Hundred Thousand (100,000) Abyssinian Dollars.

July 19, 1924

(July 26, 1932 by English Calendar)

(Signed) HEROUY

Seal of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of  
Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia